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ABSTRACT

Future developments in communication technology promise to have both positive and negative effects on information sources, messages, the media, and audiences. An increased tendency toward monopolistic control, for example, might accompany improvement in information management. A significant problem already in evidence among information gatekeepers, the media, and audiences is hypernegativism--excessive emphasis on messages that are crictical, pessimistic, conflict-producing, threatening, or violent. Research indicates that the media overrepresents bad news and that while the public is highly interested in negative mass media messages, bad news has harmful effects on human emotions, perceptions, attitudes, and behavior. Given these harmful effects, media gatekeepers must reduce the number of unnecessary negative messages and find more constructive ways to present the necessary ones. These constructive approaches could include supplementing unpleasant information with information of a positive or problem-solving nature. Research indicates that the quality of message content is very important to audiences already supersaturated with the sheer weight of information. (MM)

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The Yang and Yin of the Communications Future: Positive Technology and Negative Messages

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The Yang and Yin of the Communications Future:

Positive Technology and Negative Messages

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In ancient Chinese philosophy, the opposing forces of Yang and Yin are believed to characterize all aspects of the universe. Yang is considered to be the bright and positive pole, Yin to be the dark and negative pole, and the two are in perpetual conflict in every sphere of nature and human existence. Good vs. evil, innocence vs. knowledge, God vs. the Devil, industrial and commercial life vs. the "natural" life, life vs. death, science vs. humanity, nuclear power vs. its destructive potential --all sorts of examples about to support this notion of an opposite reaction to every phenomenon and action, whether from human or from non-human causes. The eternal battle between a positive Yang-force and a negative Yin-force is, if not a universal law, at least a universal metaphor in man's attempt to make sense of his existence, as evidenced by the religions and myths throughout all human cultures.

Whether metaphor or scientific law, there appear to be many positive Yang-forces at work in today's world of communication development, counterbalanced in a see-saw battle with some apparently inevitable negative Yin-forces. Some of these will be enumerated on the way to the main theme of technology vs. message.

The universality of the Yang-and-Yin metaphor can be illustrated in an example directly relevant to futurists and their communications. Michael Marien (1980), the editor of the World Future Society's abstracting journal, performed a content analysis on that journal's first year's

contents. He concluded that the bad news about the future clearly outweighed the good. But he stressed the importance of deliberately thinking about both the bad and good implications of futuristic developments.

> The conscious combining of areas of anticipated positive development and areas of potential disaster--the good news and bad news about the future--cannot be overstressed. Far too much thinking about the future has dwelled solely on one side or the other. The probable future, though, is not described well by either Pollyanna or Cassandra. Rather, it is a mixture of good and bad, and we should strive to incorporate both in our world views. (p. 4)

Marien went on to list four major positive areas for hope opposed by four major negative areas for concern about the future. The four positive areas, all resulting from technological development, are new ways to ease the energy crisis, biological research on life-span extension and microbiology, outer-space development, and--most relevant here--the impending revolution in communication. But he goes further to mention that even the areas of hope, seemingly positive on the surface could result in overwhelmingly negative consequences. He suggested that no thoughtful person should harbor unequivocal beliefs in a "technological fix".

A serio-comic explanation of the futurist's propensity for pessimism comes from a columnist (Nachman, 1982). In a discussion of "Future Shuck" (i.e., he's seen so much of the future he's tired of it), Nachman reasons that if you say something scary enough about what life will be like, people will buy it.

The major purpose of this paper is to dwell on only one of the innumerable Yang-and-Yin sequences pervading the communications world of the present and future. On the positive side, there is no questioning that the technology for human communication is improving, advancing, progressing, and accelerating, to result shortly in a perpetual cascade of messages through numerous channels available to almost every individual in the world. But on the dark side of the coin is some strong evidence that the messages in many communication systems, especially the mass media, are increasingly negative, pessimistic, gloomy, depressing, cynical, skeptical--with more and more emphasis on conflict, violence, and disagreement. Further, these negative messages are having harmful effects on human perceptions, attitudes, values and behaviors.

It is both unthinkable and impossible to halt the escalation in communication technology. But it may be possible to reduce the volume and improve the complexion of unnecessarily negative messages. Further, I believe such an improvement in message quality is not just desirable but necessary for future survival, given the pervasiveness of mass media and their capability for imprinting the neural system of the human brain at both conscious and unconscious levels. I fear for the fate of future humankind if all those channels to all those people are to be filled with negative messages as many are today.

In the remainder of this paper, I will: (a) list several other Yang-and-Yin speculations on current communications development, (b) present some empirical evidence regarding the mass media's excessive emphasis on negative messages and the damaging effects and (c) provide some suggestions on improving the quality of all those messages through all those channels to all those people in the communication world of the future.

Boomerangs, Benefits and Mixed Bags

The communications of the future can be simplistically classified into the component parts of sources, messages, media, and audiences. In each part, the new technology will bring some negative boomerangs, some positive benefits, and some mixtures of both. From the World Future Society's preliminary program for the 1982 conference (June, 1982) and from a symposium on 21st century communications (Haigh et al., 1981), a few diverse speculations are presented below, with a blanket acknowledgment to the various authors whose thoughts were so combined, condensed and modified for the present purpose as to make specific attribution difficult.

Information Sources. A few of the negative aspects of future communication dealing with information sources include the following:

> With more forms of communication coming together into fewer electronic systems, the danger of monopolistic control of information becomes greater.
>
> Communications may increase the struggle for power over people and resources, and this struggle may not be to the advantage of the audiences being wooed.
>
> Developments in home and other communications hardware has outstripped the ability to use them properly.
>
> With cottage industries and satellite offices, managers must learn to handle a diverse and scattered work force.
>
> Communications technology will increase the paper chase in business and waste time that might be spent on more productive processes.
>
> Computer technology may operate at cross purposes with the established legal and judicial systems, considering the changes in customary procedures that will result.

International communication may do more harm than good, because transnational companies will be in the driver's seat, and they are more concerned with power and making money than with the long-term effects of increased information flow. Communications will be dominated by merchandising, marketing and advertising rather than with useful information.

The problems of communication within and between nations may get worse. These issues are handled badly even today.

Some positive implications for information sources have been noted.

In the coming communication society, information values and not material values will be the fundamental force behind society's development, possibly benficial to civilization's future.

Writers of both fiction and non-fiction are benefitting from the use of word processing equipment, resulting in more output, increased clarity and order, and a reduction in egocentrism.

A major benefit will be, not just more information, but better information management.

The new technology will bring about a reversal in the trend toward larger more centralized systems.

Some mixed blessings for sources may result.

A new creativity based on communication may grow out of the unprecedented danger of extinction coupled with an equal opportunity for evolution into the whole universe, forcing a quantum change in human behavior for peace.

The ability to communicate and use the language effectively will become even more advantageous to those possessing it and further disenfranchise those without it.

While the new media have created a great opportunity for the performing arts, the artists have not capitalized on it to full advantage.

The messages. The two sources for these speculations indexed dozens of classification topics to cover the several hundred presentations.

It may be significant that neither "message" nor "content" nor any of the other synonyms for message substance was listed as a topical category. Few of the presentations dealt explicitly with message substance. A major concern in this paper is that message content, the only reason for the existence of any communications process, may not be emphasized adequately in discussions on the future of communication.

It needs reiteration that message substance--including the positive and negative dimension under discussion--is at least equally as important as the other elements of communication. It will be even more important in the future with the multiplicative effects of new technologies. A message reaching millions of people obviously has more impact than the same one reaching only a few hundred or thousand.

> One misunderstanding is that information transfer is seen as equivalent to communication. The latter, in fact, deals with more important things that need to be developed or understood such as emotions, symbols, rituals and biases.

Some positive implications for message substance have been noted.

> Unlike other resources and raw materials, information is not reduced by wider distribution but instead can have a synergistic and multiplicative effect.
>
> New communication technology can accelerate the ongoing redirection of our concept of health from a preoccupation with curing disease to emphasis on the expression of a high degree of "wellness."
>
> New means of communication can reduce the controversy over sex education and improve the future of human sexuality.
>
> Additional channels can break commercial television's dominance over viewing choices and lead to better quality.
>
> The new communication will allow and even require equality between sender and receiver, deal with feeling as well as thoughts, and require dealing with truth instead of half-truth and deception.

The media and their gatekeepers. A major portion of the discussions about the communications future is focussed on communications media, including the hardware, software and personnel of the new technology.

While those new developments are generally seen as positive, some negative aspects may be noted.

> All the communication skills needed for the emerging technology have not been identified, let alone taught. More school emphasis on speaking and listening and less on the traditional arts of reading and writing may be one needed change in education.
>
> The information society will need people who can manipulate increasingly sophisticated ideas, but the emerging adult generation is less literate than its parents.
>
> Future technology must be used in more creative ways than at present. The creative artist must have an increasing role in communication and help the non-artists learn creative control of the messages disseminated.
>
> Since the news media largely deal in simplistic interpretations of current events, futurists may have trouble--just as other scientists--in getting balanced responsible coverage of their findings to the general public.
>
> Advanced technology and unlimited accessibility will not necessarily lead to more understanding unless more is learned about interpersonal communication.

Audiences and effects. The increased number of messages through all the news media will be accompanied by some problems for the individuals and groups making up the audiences.

> Accelerating communications is producing both personal and social turbulence simply from the rapid changes, irrespective of the content of those changes.
>
> The availability of new information channels does not mean automatic acceptance or use or correct use.
>
> Limitless information increases noise as much as the intended message, and we do not know how to filter significant messages from the infinite variety available. It will be too easy to spread noise with the speed of light.

Communications audiences may not be able to assimilate the cornucopia of information into a coherent picture.

Some of the personal impacts may be ambivalence, resistance, confusion in the face of too much information, and other psychological effects both negative and positive.

Our image of the world is being shaped less and less by direct experience and more and more by mediated experience, resulting in wider but possibly more distorted views of the rest of the world.

The information overload will create potential personal, social and economic problems during the post-industrial period.

Just as unconscious attitudes and beliefs prevent full communication now, the new technology can magnify misunderstanding and conflict unless we learn how to choose conscious futures instead of those based on unconscious yearnings.

Home communications hardware can increase problems of isolation and alienation to outweigh the benefits.

Computer illiteracy will increase the knowledge gaps that separate the information-rich from the information-poor.

The current over-use of the thinking function of the brain will probably be even further exaggerated by the new technologies, resulting in an increasing sense of separation from other humans.

Mass media usage will increase and social interaction will decrease.

The diversified offerings will increase rather than decrease society's fragmentation, unless there are some universal messages as bases of information and experience.

As public media become more specialized, we may become more tribalized, split into sub-groups with less ability to communicate across those groups.

The world will become more diverse, more complex, more pluralistic, with conflicting social and moral values.

Some of the positive implications for audiences have been noted.

The new technology will free people from dehumanizing work and allow them to live and work where they please.

The networking function will improve personal social interaction, at least at the verbal level, and may be a new and powerful social force for positive change.

Communication and contact with society may be especially enhanced among the handicapped.

The opportunity for life-long education through the new media may be the most important development of all, if we can learn how to develop it from the failure up to now.

The effects on business can be very positive, with reduced travel, reduction in the cost of doing business, increases in office productivity, and more time for creative thinking.

Concurrent with the new communication methods is an explosive growth in research and knowledge about how the human brain grows and operates. The combined synergistic force of these two developments can transform government and business, predict conflicts and otherwise improve strategies in all areas of human concern.

Then there are some mixed blessings for audiences.

While mass media seem to promote homogeneity among citizens of divergent backgrounds and views, the new technologies may be used to promote pluralism, active participation, and social education that strengthens rather than weakens society.

Cultural constraints may produce varying effects ranging from increased cooperation to increased conflict, within and across cultures.

On traditional cultures such as Africa, the Middle East and India, the new media may raise a variety of new hopes and benefits as well as new fears and disadvantages.

More skills for interpersonal connectedness are necessary to avoid dehumanization. A major shift in methods of interaction from the dominance-subordinance mode to cooperative creativity will be necessary.

Technology is driving business costs down about 20% a year and personnel costs up about 10% a year, for a net gain in cost effectiveness. But the new technologies will not create a net increase in jobs.

Positive Technology and Negative Messages

It would be redundant to even list all the miracles in communications hardware and software now in existence and on the way. No one can question that the new technology ushering in the Information Society, The Communications Revolution, is a positive and triumphant achievement.

My present concern is with the message substance that will be filling all those channels to all those people.

More particularly, I am referring to hypernegativism in the commercial mass media (Haskins, 1981c). Hypernegative communication refers to the excessive emphasis by information gatekeepers, media and audiences on messages that are negative, critical, pessimistic, conflict-producing, tension-producing, fear-inducing, skeptical, punitive, threatening, violent and otherwise unpleasant in various ways. There is considerable evidence that hypernegativism is increasingly prevalent at all stages of the mass communication process, that its various manifestations are synergistic, and that it is having damaging effects on individuals and on many institutions and processes of the larger society.

At the everyday observation level, we see a swelling concern by professionals and the public over excessive amounts of bad news in all journalistic media. Similar concerns are voiced regarding the prevalence and popularity of violent television programming and horror movies and disaster novels.

The bad news problem. My own research into the bad news problem, specifically, during the last three years had led me to several conclusions (Haskins, 1981 a, b, c; 1982).

(1) The public is highly interested in bad news, violent television programs, horror movies, disaster novels and other kinds of negative mass media messages. Psychobiological research indicates that what we call "morbid curiosity" is innate in human nature. People tend to over-select negative information and to remember it more vividly.

(2) Bad news is more prevalent in the media than either good news or neutral news.

(3) Bad news is probably increasingly prevalent, though the evidence for this is not conclusive. However, perceptions and concerns regarding an over-emphasis on bad news have definitely increased.

(4) The news media do indeed present a negatively distorted picture of the real world. Negative events are over-represented while positive events are under-represented. In addition, the more negative events get extra-prominent display--more space, more reinforcing graphic treatment, more up-front positioning--in all mass media.

(5) There is a symbiotic and even synergistic relationship between audience interest in negative news and journalists' news values. Conflict, violence and shock value are among the high-priority axiomatic news values in the conventional wisdom of journalism. Journalism gatekeepers overwhelmingly favor the transmission of more-negative over less-negative versions of the same events. This symbiosis is reinforced by the major purpose of the mass media to attract the largest audiences possible. In short, the natural interests of the audience, the implicit values of gatekeepers, and the commercial purpose of the mass media all combine to produce an increasing spiral of negative news messages.

(6) Most alarming from this research, however, is some strong evidence that bad news has harmful effects on human emotions, perceptions, attitudes and behavior.

Several investigators have found that crime and suicide news is followed by an increase in crime and suicides and that newspaper strikes are accompanied by a decrease in crime and suicides. More conclusive, however, is the experimental evidence: even a short radio bad newscast of one to four news items creates depression, creates negative attitudes toward people and organizations, and reduces helping behavior. No conclusive research has been done on the cumulative effects of prolonged exposure to the massive dose of bad news encountered by the average person; however, given the immediate effects of small doses, the cumulative effects at the conscious and unconscious level may be tremendous.

Implications of the evidence. While that evidence is specific only to bad news, certain questions are raised regarding other kinds of negative messages. If bad news in itself has such harmful effects what must be the combined effects of bad news, violent television, horror movies, disaster novels, and all the other negative media messages we are exposed to, either voluntarily or involuntarily?

Since the mass media are so pervasive, are they serving as role models and contaminating other kinds of communication systems with their negative practices? False bad news can apparently invade any field of communication. A prominent economist (Simon, 1981) has criticized the federal government's Global 2000 Report to the President, which made gloomy predictions about population, resources and environment. Simon concluded that the assertions were completely without foundation

and commented further that such "False bad news is a very real social pollution, and a dangerous one." Among the dangers is that "doomsaying in the past decade has sapped our national will" in a self-fulfilling prophecy due to a resulting reduction of efforts. The amount of bad news about the future as noted earlier, clearly exceeds the amount of good news (Marien, 1980).

The spread of mass media practices and values into other fields of communication--organizational, intercultural, business, political, instructional, interpersonal, religious, aesthetic, etc.--is not a pleasant prospect.

If negative mass media messages have damaging effects on the relatively sophisticated and selective audiences of this country, what will result from a tidal wave of such messages on unsophisticated cultures when the new technology arrives?

Constructive Approaches for the Future

While some negative messages are necessary to a realistic view of the world for survival purposes, many of them are unnecessary. Can we decide which kinds of negative messages are necessary and which are unnecessary? Can newsmen and other mass media gatekeepers be persuaded to reduce the volume of unnecessary negative messages? Can more constructive approaches be found for presenting those negative messages we consider necessary?

There is evidence that more effective alternative methods are possible for presenting negative information through mass media--less harmful, more socially responsible and just as interesting to the audience. For

examples, in films that increase aggressive behavior, a positive ending will decrease the aggression effect. For articles that can be titled either way, optimistic titles produce more audience interest than pessimistic titles. Unpleasant information supplemented by information of a constructive or problem-solving nature is more interesting to audiences than the negative information alone. Positive reinforcement produces more learning than negative reinforcement. Two-sided or balanced messages are, in the long run, more persuasive than one-sided messages.

Neither censorship nor an unrealistic pollyanna approach is being advocated. Rather, the present suggestion is to adopt a more balanced, constructive, and pro-social approach to the necessary negative messages that must flow through the new and old communication channels of the future.

Another strong recommendation is for an increased volume of research on messages and their effects, to match the current emphasis on new technology research and development. From highly sophisticated advertising experimentation, recent evidence indicates clearly that an increased use of media and increasing volume of information may be not only unproductive but often counterproductive. Greater emphasis on the quality of message content is recommended for audiences that are supersaturated with the sheer weight of information.

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